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Honduran Peasants Confirm Report of Battle

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CAPIRE, Honduras, March 27 — Eight Honduran peasants told today of heavy fighting near this area close to the border with Nicaragua and Honduran soldiers showed reporters five bodies that they said were Nicaraguan soldiers killed in fighting inside Honduras.

The peasants' accounts and the bodies were the first evidence that journalists have been able to gather to support official accounts that a large Sandinista force attacked Nicaraguan guerrilla bases near here five days ago. "There were five days of fighting," Tolentino Sáenz, a 45-year-old peasant, said. "They say there are many dead and wounded."

"They bombed and rocketed for three days starting on Saturday," said 11-year-old Miguel Abram Soriano. "The people ran because they say the Sandinistas entered."

This tiny community is within three miles of the Nicaraguan border and some 10 miles from two large Nicaraguan guerrilla camps. It is about 140 miles east of the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa.

Peasants pointed in the direction of the guerrilla camps when they de-

scribed where they heard sounds of heavy combat in the last few days.

[In Managua, meanwhile, the Government said its army had inflicted heavy losses on rebel forces and had destroyed several base camps in the last two weeks.

[In a communiqué, the Nicaraguan Defense Ministry did not specify whether the actions took place within Nicaragua or on the other side of the Honduran border. In the past, Nicaragua has maintained that all important rebel base camps along the northern border are in Honduras. Many diplomats and other neutral observers in Managua agree.

[The Defense Ministry said Sandinista troops had killed 350 rebels and wounded 150 in a two-week period. It said 40 Sandinista soldiers were killed and 116 were wounded.]

The United States Embassy in Tegucigalpa provided two helicopters to fly several journalists here to gather accounts of what Reagan Administration officials say was a coordinated attack by more than 1,000 Sandinista troops against the two guerrilla bases. The fighting was said to have taken place in a region 15 to 20 miles east of the Honduran town of Las Trojes, in a "parrot's beak" that protrudes into Nicaragua.

United States Army helicopters — put at 14 by officials here and at 16 by officials in Washington — today completed carrying 500 to 600 Honduran troops to this volatile border zone, according to Gen. John Galvin, commander of United States military forces in Latin America. The general was boarding a helicopter to leave the area when the journalists landed.

G.I.'s 'Have Done a Good Job'

"United States forces have done a good job in getting the Hondurans here," he said before he took off. "It remains to be seen what else they need."

Five American soldiers ran the landing zone. An American officer, Lieut. Col. Larry Gragg, said they were a pathfinder team sent in to direct the landing of American helicopters from the Palmerola Air Base in central Honduras. Colonel Gragg, who said he had

come to oversee the operation, is commander of United States Army forces at Palmerola, which is the main staging area for American military maneuvers in Honduras.

The five bodies shown to reporters appeared to be of men in their 20's and early 30's. They were wearing blood-stained camouflage uniforms that appeared to be of the kind worn by Sandinista forces. The bodies had several bullet wounds. One wore boots that said in Spanish, "Made in Nicaragua." The bodies appeared to carry no other identification.

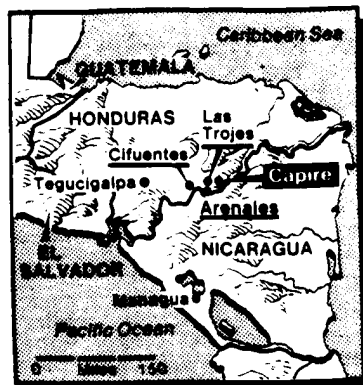
A source in close contact with Nicaraguan rebel and Honduran officials said the bodies had been collected from a nearby battlefield for journalists to see. He said the men had been killed by Nicaraguan guerrillas; a Honduran officer said that they had been killed by Honduran troops.

Reported Prisoners Are Shown

The uniforms appeared to be the same as those worn by two prisoners whom the Honduran Army presented on Wednesday. Journalists were not allowed to question the two, but they described themselves as Nicaraguan soldiers who had been captured in the fighting on the border.

In addition to the bodies, Honduran soldiers showed reporters a pile of Soviet-made AK-47 automatic rifles, a few mortars, ammunition, canteens, rocket launchers and RPG-7 rockets as well as a number of light ground cloths that said "Sandinista Popular Army."

The soldiers said the equipment,



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Fighting is reported to have taken place in area of Las Trojes, Arenales, Cifuentes and Capire.

which is the same as that used by the Sandinistas, was collected from a battlefield nearby. It was not possible to confirm their account.

The helicopter flight to the border took reporters directly over what appeared to be a large rebel camp, with dozens of green tents and large numbers of armed men standing on nearby hills and in flat hollows.

A Honduran officer who identified himself as Lieut. Col. Danilo Carbajal Molina, told reporters that the Honduran Army estimated that 1,200 Sandinista troops attacked in the area beginning last Thursday. He said the first the Honduran army knew of the attack was when Sandinista forces shot down a Honduran helicopter that day.

Colonel Carbajal said the Sandinistas may have entered the area to attack Nicaraguan guerrillas who he said occasionally came into the zone as refugees, but he then said so many Nicaraguan troops had crossed that he believed this had been a more coordinated attack.

The Hondurans have been greatly embarrassed by publicity given to the Nicaraguan attack because the Government here does not officially recognize the presence of Nicaraguan guerrilla bases inside Honduran territory. The colonel, for example, refused to acknowledge that there were such bases in the area or that they may have been the target of the Sandinista forces.

Reagan Administration officials and sources in Honduras with access to current intelligence reports say that 800 to 1,500 Sandinista troops crossed into Honduras to attack guerrilla bases and that three days of steady fighting followed. The sources here said that the fighting has now died down and that most Nicaraguan troops are heading back across the border.

A source here with access to intelligence reports said the Honduran Army had ordered Nicaraguan guerrillas to return to their bases and to stay there, apparently in an effort to reduce tensions on the border. He said Hondurans were seeking to avoid further clashes at this time between Nicaraguan rebel forces and Sandinista Army units.